

Iceland Airwaves 2013: Recap

BY JONAH FLICKER

Iceland Airwaves 2013 has come and gone, and as usual the festival went off with very few hitches. Bands generally played on time, queues were occasionally long but relatively manageable, and the streets of Reykjavik were packed with drunken Icelanders and foreigners alike breaking bottles, eating pylsur (hot dogs), vomiting and generally partying as hard as they possibly could. Once again some of the best moments of the festival were not the outstanding international bands, a few like Yo La Tengo and Fucked Up making their first appearances in this magical land, but the local Icelandic bands that, as an American, I'd never heard before. It's an incestuous relationship amongst the bands here; they all seem to share members with each other and everyone generally enjoys collaborating on projects in different styles and genres. This is unlike anything I've ever seen in any city, and it's part of the reason I love coming back year after year.

Iceland's own Prins Póló was an unexpected surprise. Though locals seemed to think the venue they played, Harpa Silfurberg, was a bit too large for the band, I didn't find it distracting in the least. Prins Póló plays quirky indie rock with aplomb and energy, varying from new wave to full-on discordant guitar rock. Each band member took his place at the front of the stage, including the drummer who stood before a simple kit, as they reliably ripped through a 40-minute set

that went from soft to loud and back again via unorthodox guitar riffs and an infectious sense of enthusiasm. Hjaltalin, on the other hand, offered up a completely different experience, with moody, emotive, dramatic electronic-based rock, each song centered around a groove informed by the sounds of drum machines and sequencers (the singer, Högni Egilsson, also occasionally performs with Iceland's own techno kingpins Gus Gus). The band even threw in a cover of Beyonce's "Halo" for good measure.

Electronic music has always been a strong point in Icelandic music, and the artists I saw carried on this tradition. Magnoose, formerly one half of Mr. Silla & Mongoose, delivered an on-point DJ set of his original work at Harlem, a small room near the city center. Though it wasn't much to watch onstage, his mix of techno and happy house was uplifting and forced a crowd that was standing still to start dancing their ass off. On that same night, M-Band played a really interesting set, one of the highlights of the festival for me. He performs with an array of drum machines and synths and treats his own voice as an instrument, sampling and layering ethereal vocals into the mix to create an eerie atmosphere of sound.

On the rock and roll front, Dimma, a band that people seem to either love or hate, delivered a balls-to-the-wall performance of metal inspired by the likes of Judas Priest and Iron Maiden. These guys are a DIY band that has found great success in Iceland, and as an American I couldn't help but find them charmingly cheesy as images of '80s hair metal flashed through my head. But Dimma takes their rock and roll extremely seriously, rock-star poses and leather outfits included, and kudos to them for it. Benny Crespo's Gang, on the other hand, likes its rock and roll more on the post-punk and math-rock side of things. The heavy inclusion of synths gave the proceedings a proggy feel, but this is truly an original band that was unlike many of the other acts I saw.

The visiting bands had a lot to live up to, but they were up to the task - although the crowd's reaction varied. Yo La Tengo played early on in the festival and seemed to perplex many of the young Icelanders in attendance. People started to leave in droves about 15 minutes in. I think many of them were aware of the band and their indie-rock legend status, but when it came down to it they just weren't feeling YLT's scrappy noise. Nevertheless, the band played a

great set, focusing on the loud bits from their catalogue over the soft, and Ira Kaplan was in fine form, wrestling unearthly squeals from his electric guitar. Montreal's We Are Wolves were great as usual. Their set was cut slightly short for time, but it didn't seem to bother them at all. Their blues-rock-dance-punk impressed the crowd, as did their cover of Black Sabbath's "Paranoid." Rapper Mykki Blanco, wearing a lovely wig, turned the crowd out at the Reykjavik Art Museum with a thrilling and highly exuberant set. I heard some perplexed muttering from a few in the audience who may not have been familiar with his work, but most were completely satisfied. And on the final night of Airwaves, Kraftwerk put on one of the best shows I've seen in recent years, a 3-D retrospective of their greatest hits that sounded fresh and modern and completely untouched by age. This was a fitting end to the 2013 edition of Iceland Airwaves, a festival that consistently delivers top-notch performances from legendary innovators and unknown upstarts to crowds that are hungry to hear it all. I can't wait to return next year.